

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

3.2 Transportation, Traffic and Circulation

3.2.1 Coachella Valley Roadways

The Coachella Valley CDCA planning area encompasses a unique geography that influences, constrains, and has shaped the regional roadway network. The valley is a northwest-southeast trending basin, bounded by high mountains that impose significant physical restrictions on roadway planning and construction opportunities in the valley, and have contributed to the convergence of high traffic volumes onto a limited number of roadways.

Among the earliest “roads” passing through the Coachella Valley was an Indian trade route known as the Cocomaricopa Trail, later renamed the Bradshaw Trail, which was one of the most important desert trails in southern California during the 1860s and 1870s. The course of the trail was largely influenced by regional topography, and throughout much of the valley, the Bradshaw Trail closely followed the toe of slope of the Santa Rosa Mountains. It took advantage of mountain spurs, which project into the valley floor, and their ability to naturally shield travelers from strong winds and blowing sand and dust. The logical placement of the Bradshaw Trail led to the establishment of permanent settlements within the coves of the Santa Rosa Mountains during the early twentieth century. The “cove communities” were strategically located where buildings and residents could be shielded from the harsh desert environment. The Bradshaw Trail was eventually replaced by State Highway 111, which provides important connectivity between the cove communities.

The region is interconnected by state and interstate highways, most notably Interstate-10, the aforementioned Highway 111, Highway 74, Highway 62 and Highway 86. Local circulation is also facilitated through a web of arterial roadways built on a north-south/east-west grid pattern. In many locations, the region’s north-south/east-west trending land use patterns and roadway grid conflict with its northwest-southeast trending topography, and the combination of these has created an intra-regional transportation challenge. The following briefly describes major roadways, which pass through or near the CDCA planning area.

Many BLM parcels in the planning area are remote, undeveloped, and inaccessible to motor vehicles. Others are accessible for off-highway and recreational vehicle use, and are designated accordingly through BLM’s Motorized Vehicle Route Designation process (see Motorized-Vehicle Access), or are accessible only to authorized vehicles for specific activities (e.g. rights-of-way issued for development of communication sites or wind energy facilities).

However, a limited number of BLM parcels are crossed by major arterials, highways, and/or railroad corridors and provide for the continuous transport of persons and goods.

These transportation facilities have easements which allow them to cross BLM land. Nonetheless, as described below, some issues pertaining to rights-of-way on public land are unresolved. Descriptions of the primary linkages that pass directly through BLM parcels in the CDCA planning area follow.

Interstate-10. The Coachella Valley is bisected by Interstate-10, which connects the valley with the Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino metropolitan areas to the west and the Phoenix region to the east. I-10 is a critical component of the regional road network and provides intra-regional and inter-city access within the valley. It consists of a divided freeway accessed from diamond-shaped interchanges spaced a minimum of one mile apart.

Interstate-10 lies along the geographic center and northwest-southeast axis of the Coachella Valley. It occurs within the valley's central drainage area and lies parallel to the prevailing winds emanating from the San Gorgonio Pass. With the exception of the Thousand Palms community, land adjacent to I-10 remains largely undeveloped due to the presence of high winds and blowing sand and the potential for flooding.

Within the CDCA planning area, I-10 makes limited passage through BLM CDCA lands, including lands at Whitewater Hill near the San Gorgonio Pass, lands east of Palm Drive and southwest of the BLM's Willow Hole ACEC, and portions of the checkerboard BLM ownership pattern located north and northwest of the Mecca Hills Wilderness.

State Highway 111. State Highway 111 is essentially an intra-valley roadway, which connects the valley with communities of the Imperial Valley to the southeast. In the vicinity of its westerly terminus at I-10 in the San Gorgonio Pass, Highway 111 passes through BLM lands located at Windy Point and Desert Angel. Highway 111 does not cross BLM lands again until just southwest of the Dos Palmas ACEC, and then through the checkerboard BLM ownership pattern approximately six miles southeast of Dos Palmas.

State Highway 62. State Highway 62, a north-south trending four-lane divided highway, passes through the northwesterly portion of the Coachella Valley. It extends north from I-10, just east of the San Gorgonio Pass, to communities in the Morongo Basin and high desert in San Bernardino County. Only a very small sliver of BLM land is co-terminus with I-10/ Highway 62 on/off ramps just east of Whitewater Hill.

State Highway 74. State Highway 74 connects the Coachella Valley with communities in southwestern Riverside County and northern San Diego County. It extends south from State Highway 111 in the City of Palm Desert, into the rocky terrain of the Santa Rosa Wilderness, through lands recently designated as critical habitat for the Peninsular bighorn sheep by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It proceeds west, then northwest, into the San Bernardino National Forest, to the mountain community of Mountain Center and the Hemet Valley.

BLM lands within the CDCA planning area crossed or bordered by Highway 74 include holdings in Dead Indian, Grapevine and Carrizo Canyons, extending from the toe of the mountain and into elevated terrain.

Ramon Road. Ramon Road serves as an arterial connector for local traffic from Palm Springs to Washington Street just east of the Coachella Valley Preserve. This road is bordered by BLM lands in the vicinity of Thousand palms Canyon Road.

Dillon Road. Dillon Road is a two-lane, northeast-southwest trending arterial that crosses the northern portion of the Coachella Valley. It extends from the Indio/Coachella city boundary at State Route 86, passes under Interstate-10, and continues northwest through the valley. It passes on the north side of the Indio Hills, through the Sky Valley community, to State Highway 62 in the southern portion of Desert Hot Springs. Its passage through or adjacent to BLM lands is limited to holdings in the vicinity of East Wide Canyon, scattered BLM lands in Sky Valley, and one section (Section 30) located about three miles north of the Coachella Branch of the All American Canal.

Varner Road. Varner Road is a two-lane arterial, which runs just north of and generally parallel to Interstate-10. It extends from Palm Drive on the west to the I-10/Jefferson Street interchange near Bermuda Dunes on the east. Segments of Varner Road follow the route of the historic Ocean-to-Ocean Highway, a link of the transcontinental highway. Although exact dates are unclear, archival sources trace the construction of the Ocean-to-Ocean Highway to the late 1930s. It primarily served as a route for crossing through the valley, rather than one that accommodated intra-valley travel.

Although Varner Road provides important local access, its functionality west of Thousand Palms is limited. Most lands north of Varner Road in this vicinity are undeveloped lands in the Indio Hills, which are subject to high winds, blowsand, and flash flooding, and have limited potential for future development. East of Thousand Palms, the utility of Varner Road is limited to its role as a frontage road adjacent to I-10. Important BLM lands within the Willow Hole ACEC are traversed by Varner Road in the vicinity of Edom Hill. No other BLM lands are impacted by this roadway.

Indian Avenue/Indian Canyon Drive. Indian Avenue/Indian Canyon Drive extends north from south Palm Springs, to the Little San Bernardino Mountains northwest of Desert Hot Springs. This major arterial connects traffic from Interstate-10 with the City of Palm Springs to the south, and Desert Hot Springs and Highway 62 to the north. South of Interstate-10, it crosses a broad 100-year floodplain, which is associated with the Whitewater River and is up to two miles wide in some locations. It is at this location that Indian Avenue runs along the eastern boundary of BLM lands, portions of which have been leased for wind energy development.

Thousand Palms Canyon Road. Although not considered a major regional arterial, Thousand Palms Canyon Road is an important two-lane roadway that provides the only north-south connection through the Indio Hills. It is located approximately two miles east of the community of Thousand Palms, and extends from Ramon Road on the south, to Dillon Road on the north. It passes through portions of four BLM sections, which are part of the Coachella Valley Preserve and the sensitive biological habitat contained therein.

Rail Service. Freight and passenger rail services are offered along the Union Pacific Railroad, which was built in the second half of the nineteenth century. The railroad originally was part of the transcontinental railroad, which connected the Pacific coast with Yuma, Arizona. It enters the Coachella Valley from the west through the San Geronio Pass and proceeds east, parallel to Interstate-10. In the City of Indio, it turns southeast and continues along the east side of the Salton Sea. Union Pacific rail lines pass through several BLM holdings within the CDCA planning area, including lands at Windy Point, lands immediately west of Garnet Hill, and lands southwest of the Willow Hole ACEC. The railroad right-of-way does not cross BLM lands again until just southwest of the Dos Palmas ACEC, and then through the checkerboard BLM ownership pattern approximately six miles southeast of Dos Palmas. The old Kaiser Mine/Eagle Mountain railroad is now active and proposed to transport trash from Highway 111 to the Eagle Mountain landfill. This rail line tees off of the Union Pacific rail line along Highway 111 and traverses through Dos Palmas, Chuckwalla Bench and north of Interstate 10 near Desert Center, ending at the Eagle Mountain landfill.

3.2.2 R.S. 2477 and Rights-of-Way Issues

Revised Statute 2477 (R.S. 2477) was passed by Congress as Section 8 of the Mining Act of 1866, which established the first system for patenting lode-mining claims and provided for access. R.S. 2477 stated “the right-of-way for the construction of highways over public lands, not reserved for public uses, is hereby granted.” It was repealed when the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) was enacted on October 21, 1976. However, FLPMA did not terminate any existing “rights-of-way” granted under R.S. 2477.

There are often questions about what was offered under R.S. 2477, to whom, and how the rights-of-way were to be perfected. These questions have not been answered in a clear and consistent manner either locally or nationally. Many routes across public land came into existence with no documentation of the public land records. Routes across public land constructed after 1866, but before withdrawal, patent, mining claim, or reservation for a specific purpose, and before the passage of FLPMA may be R.S. 2477 rights-of-way.

In an attempt to clear up these ambiguities, Congress directed the Department of the Interior to study the history, impacts, status, and alternatives to R.S. 2477 rights-of-way

and to make recommendations for processing claims (assertions). This process began in November 1992. Public meetings were held to assist in preparing a report that was submitted to Congress in May 1993. The report stated that, until completion of the report, the Department "...deferred processing pending claims unless there is an immediate and compelling need to recognize or deny any claims."

The BLM was directed to prepare regulations to guide the process of reviewing R.S. 2477 claims. Draft regulations were published in 1994. Three terms are important in determining which roads are R.S. 2477 rights-of-way: (1) "construction," (2) "highways," and (3) "not reserved for public uses." The terms "construction" and "highways" are the most controversial provisions of R.S. 2477 and the regulations. On November 19, 1995, Congress approved a moratorium on the regulations. Because there are no final regulations that provide criteria for processing claims under R.S. 2477, the policy of deferring the processing of claims unless there is a compelling need remains in place.

The route network identified under the Proposed Plan was developed through a route designation process that considered resource management issues and regulatory and statutory closures (such as in designated wilderness). This process did not make any determinations under R.S. 2477. If a route were proposed for designation as "closed," such a designation would not constitute a determination that an R.S. 2477 right-of-way does not exist. Such closure does not extinguish any R.S. 2477 right-of-way that may exist. Conversely, a route designated as "open" does not mean that the route was determined to be an R.S. 2477 right-of-way.